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THE REPUTATION OF JOHN DONNE AS METRIST

I

The reputation of John Donne as metrist has undergone many vicissitudes. When, for instance, Ben Jonson, the earliest recorded critic of Donne's style, confided to his host, Drummond of Hawthornden, that John Donne, although "the first poet in the world for some things", still "for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging", he probably had little idea that posterity would be coupling his own name with that of Donne for the same sort of fault. Yet, a hundred and sixty years later, another great English 'classicist', Dr. Samuel Johnson, in his famous discussion of the so-called 'Metaphysical Poets', was to attribute one element of the Metaphysical style to the examples of Donne and of Jonson, "whose manner resembled that of of Donne more in the ruggedness of his lines than in the cast of his sentiments". In the same year, moreover, the Reverend Vicesimus Knox, with all the crabbed dogmatism of many critics in his profession, predicted that the neglect of the "graces of composition" by Donne, Jonson, and their imitator, Cowley, would result in their being hidden away "on the upper shelf of some dusty and deserted library". (Ben Jonson had also prophesied that Donne, "for not being understood, would perish".) But something went wrong with their expectations, and one can imagine the expressions of astonishment on their faces if they had been privileged to look into the future at such statements as the following, written one hundred and forty-three years later still; that is, in 1921: "Donne's verse has a powerful and haunting harmony of its own . . . ; and the felicities of verse are as frequent and startling as those of phrasing."

What is the explanation of these contradictions? Have we moderns a special revelation in matters which have been concealed for centuries? Have the gods suddenly endowed the readers and critics of the last few decades with new rhythmical and poetical senses? Perhaps the answer to the last two questions may be "Yes"; but in any case it is exceedingly interest-

ing (and even instructive) to follow the course of Donne's reputation as a metrist from his day down to our own, and to see, if possible, why at the present time there has been such a revival of appreciation for his poetry on this particular score, among many another.

II

Very curiously, Donne's metrical peculiarities seem to have troubled no one between the time of Jonson and Dryden. Perhaps Jacobean and Caroline ears were better attuned than those of the Restoration to the rhythms in which men like Mr. Grier-son¹ find such individual harmonies; or, on the other hand, as practically all the Neo-Classicists believed, the early seventeenth-century ear may itself have been quite deaf to any beauty of 'numbers'. At any rate, Dryden's fault-finding (in 1668 and later) with Donne's "rough cadence", despite the poet's wit and learning, found a ready reception among the literary public—soon to praise extravagantly the 'smoothness' of Edmund Waller—and appeared again in Milton's nephew, Edward Phillips, in 1675. And the tradition has persisted from then continuously to the twentieth century. Only of late has it showed signs of weakening.

The explanation of this attitude is simple and easily understandable, but also rather surprising. The Neo-Classicists concentrated their attention on those poems of Donne which best agreed in subject-matter with the spirit and taste of their own later age. In other words, just as the earlier part of the century had appreciated Donne best as the Dean of St. Paul's and as an eloquent and considerate preacher (who spoke with an hour-glass at his elbow), so the Neo-Classicists read him as one of the first English satirists. Dryden's comments, however, were made upon Donne's versification in only one type of his poetry—his satires, which are unquestionably the most apparently rough and irregular of all his work; and for two hundred years or so the majority of readers based their verdict concerning Donne's rhythm on the same satires.

¹The quotation at the end of the first paragraph is from his recent anthology, *Metaphysical Poetry*, p. xxiii.

The most conspicuous illustration of this attitude toward Donne was, of course, the self-styled 'versification' of three of the satires by Pope and Parnell. The popular approval of Pope's work (Parnell's being seldom even mentioned) is sufficient evidence of the public's opinion of Donne's metrics. There were few who did not hold that Pope had vastly improved the 'numbers', although many, like Johnson, spoke of the "imbecility" of his work as a whole. Among the supporters of Pope's 'versification' were numbered men of all types: Bishop Warburton, Pope's executor; Vicesimus Knox once more; both of the Warton brothers, whose ears remained Neo-Classic in spite of the scattering Romantic symptoms in their heads; the writers of the *New and General Biographical Dictionary*, one of the numerous compendia of predigested knowledge for which the eighteenth century showed so much fondness; "W. G.", a friend of the lame Scotch printer, Andrew Shirrefs; George Ellis, editor of one of the most popular of the anthologies of older English poetry at the end of the century; W. L. Bowles, editor of Pope's works, and object of Wordsworth's poetic admiration; and so on. These men and many others seemed to know Donne's satires only—or at least mainly—through Pope's weakened paraphrase.

Those who mentioned Donne's own satirical style directly, however, nearly always had some sharp or amusing phrase to apply. Walter Harte, who was tutor to Lord Chesterfield's son and who predicted of Donne that although "Forgotten now; yet still his fame shall last", described the satires as "maim'd and bruis'd". William Mason apostrophized "rough Donne"; and the industrious cleric and historian, Thomas Birch, spoke of Donne's "most inharmonious versification". When, in 1756, in the general introduction to his *Essay on. . . Pope*, Joseph Warton showed a slight disposition to be merciful to Donne, the *Monthly Review* immediately caught him up by answering with an emphatic negative his paraphrase of a late seventeenth-century dictum which questioned rhetorically whether "any man with a poetical ear ever yet read ten lines of Donne without disgust?" And thereupon (in his next edition) Warton flabbily placed Donne in the third rank of his poets instead

of the second! He did so with regret, nevertheless, for in a passage in his later edition of Pope's works (which, it will be observed, also contains an interesting juxtaposition of the names of Donne and of the man who preserved for us Jonson's translation of Donne) he wrote:—

“If Donne had taken equal pains, he need not have left his numbers so much more rugged and disgusting, than many of his cotemporaries, especially one so exquisitely melodious as Drummond of Hawthornden.”

The critics during the remainder of the eighteenth century continued in the same paths. David Hume, with his most unpoetical of souls, found in the satires “the hardest and most uncouth expression that is anywhere to be met with”. George Jeffreys, discussing the use of monosyllables in poetry, stated that “verses ought . . . not to stand stock still like doctor Donne's”. James Granger, whose once popular but now forgotten illustrated *Biographical History* gave his age the term ‘to grangerize’, compared Donne's verses to the “running down of a larum”; and also, copying Dryden, told how Donne's “thoughts were much debased by his versification”. In the latter opinion he was followed almost word for word by Robert Anderson, in his important *Poets of Great Britain* series, and by the third edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. These works round out the Neo-Classical opinion of Donne as satirical metrist.

But the affair did not end with the eighteenth century. Every period is always provided with its reactionaries, who, if not traditionalists in one thing, are pretty certain to be so in another. The nineteenth century, in its estimate of Donne's metrics, was no exception to the generalization. Southey indulged his by wit, asserting that—

“Donne could never have become a poet, unless Apollo taking his ears under his divine care, would have wrought as miraculous a change in their internal structure, as of old he wrought in the external of those of Midas.”

Much less important men following Southey, such as John Aikin, George Cunningham, and Nathan Drake, expressed the same idea, and bridged the gap between Southey and Landor,

who summarized the verse of the satires as "Frost-bitten and lumbaginous, . . . gnarl'd and knotty". This judgment was affirmed by such female essayists as Mrs. K. B. Thompson, by such literary historians as Thomas Arnold (not *the* Thomas), by such collectors as Thomas Corser, and even—shameful though it be to confess—by editors of Donne themselves. For Norton, in the Grolier Club edition of 1895, stated frankly that he did not "impugn" Jonson's pronouncement, and called Donne's "sins in this respect . . . unpardonable and unaccountable". Dr. Augustus Jessop had said virtually the same thing, and Leslie Stephen supported him—even going him a bit better by telling how "some strange discord in form and substance" always "sets my teeth on edge". He made the statement, moreover, in the year of enlightenment, 1900. Courthope, to be sure, was quite right when he wrote shortly afterwards that Donne's influence in harmony and proportion was not such as would "carry forward the refinement of our language from one social stage to another"; but he was looking at the matter historically.

After 1900, nevertheless, very few opinions can be found which condemn Donne unequivocally and unqualifiedly for his 'harshness'. How, then, did the change occur?

III

The recognition of Donne as a poet with a certain, if limited, rhythmical capacity sprang from the slow realization that he was the author of other poems than satires. Just as the latest contemporary development in Donne's reputation has been the perception of his qualities as a metrical artist and technician, so, in accordance with its own new tendencies, the nineteenth century 'discovered' Donne as a lyric poet.

Two or three steps in this direction, however, had been made before 1800. The silence of Donne's contemporaries on this particular phase of the subject shows at least that they did not violently disapprove of his work. Apparently the first favorable remark of any importance, nevertheless, was made by Donne's idealistic biographer, "honest" Izaak Walton, who mentioned his "many divine sonnets, and other high, holy, and harmonious composures"; but as Walton's whole passage on Donne's poetry

was merely incidental to his main interest in Donne's religious career, the choice of the word "harmonious" may indicate little more than a penchant for alliteration. The paragraph, however, was later appropriated by William Winstanley, compiler of two hack biographical collections, without any exact acknowledgment.

Bishop Warburton, however, admirer though he was of Pope's 'versification' of the satires, was one of the first to perceive the beauties of verse in other classes of Donne's poetry. In 1751 he wrote: ". . . as appears by his other poems, and especially from that fine one, called the *Progress of the Soul*, his verse did not want harmony." Pope himself had commended the same poem, although not specifically for its 'numbers'. Some sixteen years later the *Critical Review* voiced a general protest against "the great inclination" which "the present age discovers towards the uncultivated measure of Donne and Jonson". Dr. Andrew Kippis, of the *Biographia Britannica*, also defended Donne against Warton's charge about "ten lines of poetry" by simply quoting four stanzas from "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning". These few vindications, however, were sporadic and more or less unconscious in their attempts at a readjustment of Donne's reputation as a metrist.

In the nineteenth century, on the other hand, it became more and more the custom for really perspicacious critics to make the distinction between Donne's satires and much of his other verse. Alexander Chalmers did so in his edition of the English poets. Mrs. Anna Jameson just succeeded in doing so in her *Memoirs of the Loves of the Poets* a few years afterwards. The *Penny Cyclopædia* put the situation strikingly when it wrote, in 1837, that "whilst many of the pieces of Donne, written in lyric measures, are absolute music, what he has composed in the heroic measure is painfully uncouth and barbarous". Others who seasoned their criticism of the satires with praise of the lyrics were Henry Alford, editor of Donne; Edward Farr, anthologist; Dr. George Macdonald, author of *England's Antiphon*; Archbishop Trench, whose studies of words did so much to popularize the science; and the equally famous Bishop Lightfoot. Henry Beers also qualified his criticism similarly in 1890; and the all-inclusive Saintsbury in 1896 penned an unusually sane

analysis of the changed points of view at that date. The whole subject was such a 'live' one at the juncture of the centuries that nearly all of the flood of magazine articles and the like which took up the larger subject of Donne as a poet also at least touched upon his abilities as an artist in prosody. Among these periodicals and journals may be listed the *Academy*, the *Philadelphia Citizen*, the *Temple Bar*, the *National Review*, the *New World*, *Leisure Hours*, and the *Argosy*. All of these factors were important in establishing Donne as a poet in technique as well as in imagination.

IV

But most of these writers had done nothing but the obvious thing, to persons of open ears and minds. The melody in Donne's lyrics could escape only the orally and mentally deaf. The final stage in the development of his reputation came, first, through the hesitating suggestion of a few 'radicals' that Donne's form, even—or better, perhaps, especially—in his satires, was not negligent; and, second, through the rapidly accepted hypothesis that this form was, in fact, carefully planned, with a well-designed scheme of original versification and of the effect to be achieved, perhaps in imitation of Persius.

Donne himself, in several of his poems, was not afraid to anticipate the critics of his 'ruggedness', for he spoke of his "harsh verse" and its "lame measure", of his "coarse lines", and so on, in various places. Yet much of this was merely conventional modesty. Thomas Carew's elegy on Donne contains lines which are apparently the only expression of a contemporary understanding of Donne's efforts in prosody. Carew first praised his friend and "master" for drawing "a line of masculine expression"—a phrase which was later to be applied to another 'rough' Metaphysical satirist, John Cleveland. He then went on:—

"But thou art gone, and thy strict lawes will be
Too hard for Libertines in Poetry.
They will repeale the goodly exil'd traine
Of gods and goddesses, which in thy just raigne
Were banish'd nobler Poems, now, with these
The silenc'd tales o' th' Metamorphoses
Shall stuffe their lines, and swell the windy Page,

Till Verse refin'd by thee, in this last Age,
 Turne ballad rime, Or those old Idolls bee
 Ador'd againe, with new apostasie."

This, being interpreted, seems to state as plainly as possible that Donne had attempted to work two kinds of reform in poetry—one in material, and the other in style and versification. And, after all, what would be more natural? English poetry was still in its childhood, precocious as that childhood was, and the desire to direct and stabilize it by experiment was manifest everywhere. Wyatt's earlier metre, often tending toward the old Teutonic four-stress line although containing the correct five-stress number of syllables, and Surrey's verse, occasionally approximating mediæval forms, as in his 'poulter's measure', may both have been experimental. The grotesque attempts of translators like Abraham Fraunce and Richard Stanyhurst at quantitative verse were merely more startling exhibitions of the same reformatory purpose. Why, then, should not Donne make his contribution to the same cause? Such, at any rate, is the theory of those who have tried to solve what they have called his 'secret' and his 'mystery'.

The exoneration of Donne from the charge of simple slovenliness in workmanship, then, had its real roots in the seventeenth century; but nothing grew from them until the later eighteenth. A writer (perhaps Goldsmith) in the *Literary Magazine* for 1758 then suggested that Donne "seems to have been at pains not to pass for a poet"; and Richard Hurd, best known for his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, not long afterward asserted that both Donne and Jonson "*affected* harsh numbers and uncouth expression".

The nineteenth century developed the idea, and numbered among its appraisers of Donne's metre some of its best poets and critics. Wordsworth wrote clear-mindedly that the "exponent or symbol held forth by metrical language must in different eras of literature have excited very different expectations", and cited the age of Donne and Cowley in comparison with that of Dryden or Pope. Coleridge, however, was the first to go the whole length in his appreciation and analysis—although his penetration is less surprising when we remember his interest in such

metrical questions, as evidenced by *Christabel*. That Coleridge commended the smoothness of the songs goes without saying; in addition, however, he wrote on several occasions to this general effect:—

“ . . . to read Donne you must measure *time*, and discover the time of each word by the sense of the passion. . . . In poems where the writer *thinks*, and expects the reader to do so, the sense must be understood to understand the metre.”

The short-lived *Retrospective Review*, in the third decade of the century, was another ‘high spot’ in the discovery of Donne, finding in him “a mode of expression singularly terse, simple and condensed—an exquisite ear for the melody of versification. . . .”

In the latter half of the century, George L. Craik seems to have been the first great enthusiast for all the poems: “. . . we cannot doubt”, he wrote in his short history of literature, “that whatever harshness they have was designedly given to them, and was conceived to infuse into them an essential part of their relish.” He also elaborated on the effect of their “deep and subtle music . . . in which the cadences respond to the sentiment, when enunciated with a true feeling of all they convey”. Then came Robert Browning, whose influence, although indirect, has been very far-reaching, and whose frequent stylistic similarity to Donne has often been remarked. In fact, Alexander Grosart dedicated his edition of Donne to Browning, “knowing how much his poetry, with every abatement, is valued and assimilated by him”. Elizabeth Barrett, indeed, noticed Browning’s devotion early in their acquaintance, and several times spoke of “your Donne”. Grosart himself, although scouting the idea of Donne’s “indifference”, still failed to find any prevailing ‘smoothness’ in him. J. W. Hales also reiterated the doctrine of Donne’s premeditated effects; and Arthur Symonds declared outright that Donne—

“began with metre and invented a system of prosody which has many merits, and would have had more in less arbitrary hands. . . . If one will but read him always for the sense, for the natural emphasis of what he has to say, there are few lines which will not come out at all events in the way in which he meant them to be delivered.”

Edmund Gosse, most romantic of biographers and apologists, insisted in 1894 that "it seems certain that he intentionally introduced a revolution into English versification", in reaction against Spenser, Daniel, and their ilk. Saintsbury, however, betrayed an abnormal scepticism in the view that although Donne's "roughness was undoubtedly to some extent deliberate", yet that he "had any intention of attempting a new prosody there is not the least reason for believing". But here Saintsbury stands almost alone, since others, such as Schelling and Chadwick, speak of Donne's "successful inventive ingenuity in the device of metrical effects", or of his "stiff-necked individuality" of rhythm.

In the twentieth century, students and scholars, who had always been interested in Donne, took a new and more scientifically thorough approach to his prosody, and many studies and papers were either printed or delivered. Germans like Rudolph Richter and Wilhelm Trost took up his style in the usual pedestrian German fashion, treating his technique incidentally. The "perpetual 'hovering accent'" mentioned by Professor Belden is certainly very descriptive of Donne's metrics. But the most important of these works is that by Wightman F. Melton, entitled *The Rhetoric of John Donne's Verse* (to which this essay is indebted for much nineteenth-century critical material). Melton's solution of the "riddle" of Donne—*i.e.*, by stressing Donne's abundant use of secondary accent and of the repetition of the same word now in arsis, now in thesis, positions—is often fantastic in its applications, but at least it is provocative; and although it can hardly be taken as the last word on the subject, it is certainly in accord with the modern estimate of Donne as a real metrist.

V

Melton's dissertation, however, was in 1906. As the country newspaper critics say, 'much water has flowed under the poetical bridges' between 1906 and 1922. Has Donne suffered or gained by the passage of time and the development of poetical theory? The answer is unquestionably that his position is stronger than ever.

For Donne was essentially a modern poet. One can imagine him in complete sympathy with the realists, imagists, and vers librists of the last decade and a half. 'Hardness', 'the exact word', 'intensity', 'no compromise with public taste', 'accommodation of metre to sense', 'the deeper, subtler rhythms of common speech', etc., etc.,—these all seemed to be cardinal articles in Donne's poetical creed. The contemporary revival of interest in the whole group of 'Metaphysical' poets has concentrated on Donne, and has not neglected his metrics. Readers of all classes have been attracted and piqued by him. Poets like J. C. Squire and T. S. Eliot have been called (sometimes, indeed, with overstatements of the case) 'Metaphysical' in both style and substance; and so have Hardy and Meredith. Richard Aldington, a true classicist among vers librists, often mentions Donne and Cowley in his criticisms; and even such American poets of the youngest generation as Glenway Westcott have been carried away by Donne's religious sonnets. A friend of mine—an amateur poet (for he 'has published nothing as yet'), who reads verse with the long, chanting cadence so popular to-day—was overjoyed to pick up Grierson's edition of Donne at half price, and I have already noticed the influence of Donne's metre in some of his more chameleon-like work. The literary critics of the newspapers—as, for instance, Llewellyn Jones of the *Chicago Post*—frequently refer to Donne and his metrical style. Nor, finally, have the schools overlooked him, for many college students and teachers of my acquaintance have shown themselves fascinated both by what he has to say and by the manner and form in which he says it.

For many years, indeed, it has been a habit to call the measure of Donne's satires "conversational"; and some have found the "sonorous dignity" of the prose of Bacon and Sir Thomas Browne in the funeral elegies. Neo-Classicists like Matthew Prior and Dr. John Brown, indeed, had accused Donne of actually writing prose, but their words were not meant to be complimentary, as were those of Dr. Sprat when he praised the "inequality of number" in Cowley's Pindarics because of "its near affinity with prose". To-day it is not quite such a criminal offence as it was in the eighteenth century to draw upon the re-

sources of less obvious prose rhythm for true poetical metrical effects. 'Free verse', having squandered its overflow of vitality in excess, is beginning to settle down and adjust and combine itself with the older metres; and this combination is exactly what we find in Donne. Is it any wonder, then, that Donne is becoming more and more widely read for his technique, just as he and the other 'Metaphysical' poets are also being read for their substance?

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